

Collegiate Preparation and Examination Differences and Similarities Between the
United States of America and Modern Japan

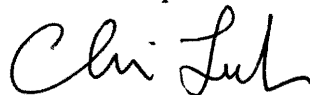
An Honors Thesis (Honors 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Chris Luke". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Chris" and the last name "Luke" clearly distinguishable.

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Abstract

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Collegiate preparation and examinations are acceptable and often expected paths to pursue during secondary education in the United States. This concept however, is not limited to the United States and is a common academic practice in several countries throughout the world. Japan is one of the most academically prestigious countries and is recognized as having a competitive secondary education for the pursuit of collegiate education. These practices and preparation hold both similarities and differences with those of the United States. I will analyze these two countries and their approaches to collegiate academia with research and personal accounts of higher education pursuers from Japan.

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Introduction

The daily life of Japanese students starts at seven A.M. They make the commute to school where they will spend their time studying and preparing for college, as do most students of their age around the world. After classes end, many students attend club and sports activities. However, instead of ending the school day like most American students, the school day in Japan is not over. After these club activities, students then attend a “juuku” which in English translates as “cram school.” Japan and the U.S. take two different approaches to college preparation. Throughout this paper, I will discuss the preparation differences for entrance exams and the resulting consequences of these examinations. These paths exist because of the array of examinations needed to enter the university level of education. In the following paper I will discuss how students prepare for the tests, describe the examination process for five Japanese students, explain the university standardized testing process in America, and for what specific purposes university entrance examinations are given. I spent October 2009 through August 2010 in Japan on a study-abroad program. Therefore, some information is based on my own experience and observations from this time period, and not cited.

The U.S. System

According to the September 2010 edition of Time magazine, Japan was ranked as the 3rd best educational system in the world. America trailed significantly, ranked as the 11th best system.

Over the past decade, in the United States standardized testing has become a political issue that has been hotly debated. Not only is standardized testing prevalent in primary and secondary education, but also is a key factor for hopeful students to enter university education. The SAT (formerly the Scholastic Aptitude Test) and the ACT (American College Testing) are the two major examinations given to American high school students in order to test their achievements, and to determine colleges these students will attend. These two tests are broad and consistent measurements for all American students. While the content does vary within the tests (the ACT focuses on science and logic while the SAT does not) the examinations are uniform across the nation.

The ACT covers high school level grammar, reading, mathematics, scientific reasoning and offers an optional writing test. The ACT is argued to cover material which is learned throughout high school, and the score represents how much of that information a student has retained. The ACT also reaches farther into mathematical and scientific areas than the SAT. Students can expect to find math problems ranging all the way from algebra to trigonometry on the ACT, whereas the SAT usually does not exceed geometry in its level of difficulty. The subjects are more specific and have logically deduced answers. The SAT is a nationally standardized test that narrows its material down to three main subject points: reading comprehension, math, and writing ability. The SAT claims to be more reasoning and “aptitude based” testing. The way the tests are scored also varies. On the SAT a student receives one point for every correct answer, no points for every question left blank, and one fourth of a point is removed for every incorrect answer. While the

ACT is similar, students are not penalized for incorrect answers. Each university holds different levels of expectations and score requirements for admission. A school's recommended scores can usually be found on the school website and also on the SAT and ACT information websites.

Because the ACT and SAT vary so significantly on testing levels and what they are testing for, it is not possible to say if one test is a stronger test than the other. However, colleges and universities will require different tests and scores depending on the university and the department the student is seeking to enter. Some departments within universities will require different tests and scores than the general admission requirements of the university. Example departments would be engineering, mathematics, sciences, and honors departments. In many of the United States universities, these departments require a higher score on either the SAT or ACT (usually the ACT for science and math courses) for immediate entry into the department. If the departmental requirements are not met but the student is still able to enter the university, they can study and then apply for a late entry or major change into the program at a later date.

The Japanese System

The nation of Japan has developed a different approach to determining university placement. Rather than only providing one uniform test for the nation, each individual college or university constructs their own examination to give to prospective students along with one optional standardized test. The content of the tests and difficulty is based on the level of prestige of the college or university. It is

said that Tokyo University has one of the most difficult exams in the nation. In contrast, a local university might allow a more attainable score for a wider range of students.

While the Japanese do not expect students to take part in a standardized test, there is one annual test offered for students wishing to apply to several universities. The official name for the test in Japanese is 大学入学者選抜大学入試センター試験 (Daigaku Nyugakusha Senbatsu Daigaku Nyushi Center Shiken), and is known in Japan as the “Center Exam.” In 2006, it was reported that more than eight hundred and twenty Japanese universities were participating in the examination process. The test takes place over two days, usually after the start of the third trimester in the Japanese school year (typically mid-January). There are several differences between this standardized test and the SAT and ACT in the U.S. First, this test is much more inclusive. The Center Exam tests extensively over mathematics, Japanese and world history, English as a second language, and the sciences. The Center Exam also has a required listening section for foreign languages. Also, simply taking the test does not assure entrance into a specific university. Along with the Center Exam, there is a process known as the recommendation system.

The recommendation system takes a student’s score and places that score with a suggested university. A student can then take that score to one or more universities for which his/her score is suitable (much like taking a higher SAT score to Harvard University and a lower one to a community college). However, a university does not have to take the recommendation of the Center Exam. A

specific university may require the student to take the university's own exam or reject the Center Exam all together. The Center Exam is a way for students to measure themselves and see what universities are appropriate for their personal skill level. Since the test is in January, it also gives students a little more time before individual university examinations to study more or to change their course of action for university life.

As mentioned previously, there are also individual exams offered by universities in Japan. University exams are held in early March of every year and are open to any student who will be soon receiving a high school diploma or who has already completed their high school education. This means that people who fail the exams initially will be able to take them again a year later. Adults wishing to continue their education may also take the exams. Similar to universities in the U.S., each school holds a different pedigree and levels of pedagogy. Therefore, the more prestige a university has, the more difficult the exam becomes. Most students will take many exams during the examination period. This is to ensure a backup university in case of failure to be accepted at the university of choice. In my experience, the university will not have classes for enrolled students for a week, in order to accommodate for potential student examinations. Students who wish to take a university exam must take it at the university itself (not a remote location). Unlike the Center Exam, these examinations are specific to the university and thus are not as comprehensive and are only a few hours in length. This gives students the opportunity to take several examinations during the testing period. After examinations have been scored, students must return to the university and look up

their corresponding ID numbers to see if they have passed the test. If they pass the test, then they have been accepted into the university.

U.S. University Admittance

Admittance is another concept that differs from the U.S. While American universities like to see above average standardized tests scores, it is not the only determining factor in the admission process. According to a contact at a nationally recognized supplementary institute (who did not wish to be named), standardized test scores hold 75% percent of the weight to get into a university. The remaining 25% is based on high school transcripts, extra-curricular activities, interviews, and how many other students with the same score are attempting to enter the university. In other words, just having a higher test score does not mean a student will be granted access into the university and/or department of choice in the U.S. Many U.S. universities claim to look for well-rounded students who can bring something different or special to their university. To enter a university, a student must not only have the necessary scores, but also the ability to “sell” oneself to the university. The student needs to be able to make a convincing case as to why a university should select this particular student to be entered into the program over another.

University Test Preparation

As stated above, a large part of preparation for college in the America is taking a standardized test. Preparation for the SAT and/or ACT varies greatly among high school students. During the sophomore and junior years of high school

(second and third year respectively) many students chose to take a free pre-test known as the PSAT, or the Pre-SAT. The test is offered in most high schools around the country and is scored in the same manner as the official SAT. This is to give students a reference point for starting preparation into the SAT. Students are able to take these scores and see how much and where they need to improve before taking the official SAT/ACT in a year.

Japan also has a similar method to give students a reference point as to where they stand on college entrance exams. At the Japanese cram schools, as part of the daily routines, pre-tests are given to the students. These tests are not always college specific. However, students are able to choose certain universities to compare scores. For example, a student will choose to look at University 'A' through University 'D', then when their pre-tests are scored the student can see how the overall score will hold against a certain university. A student may receive a C letter grade for University 'B', while Universities 'C' and 'D' receive a B letter grade and University 'A' was a failure. This student will have to decide to keep on studying to get into Universities 'A' or 'B' or choose to settle for Universities 'C' or 'D', which may not be the student's first choice of school. Depending on the cram school, these pre-tests could be offered as often as once a month.

After the PSAT, American students can choose from several paths on the road to college. There are many self-help SAT/ACT preparation guides with practice tests, answers, and study guides. Some students turn to teachers for help, others

chose to do nothing, and a small percentage of students turn to an outside source -- such as a learning center.

U.S. Test Preparation Centers

Recently, I had the opportunity to speak with a director of education at one of these education centers (who wished to remain anonymous). Thus, I will refer to the company as the Education Center and to the director as Ms. Smith. The Education Center offers a seven-week preparation course before each scheduled test date for the SAT/ACT. The Center offers two practice tests to the students. The first of which acts like a “benchmark” test, similar to the PSAT, to assess the student’s current ability and which specific areas a student needs to work on during their time at the Center. The Center focuses on math and reading for the SAT and will occasionally look at science for the ACT at the student’s request. Ms. Smith stated, however, that the main focus of the Center is strategic planning. She indicated that SAT scores can sometimes be improved by strategy and not only intelligence. The example she gave me was the fact that the SAT deducts points for wrong answers. The Center reminds students to answer all of the questions they know for sure first; these are called the ‘green light’ questions. Then, the student is to move on to slightly harder questions referred to as ‘yellow light’ questions. Finally, students are encouraged to not answer questions that they have no idea how to answer because not answering does not subtract any points from the final score.

Ms. Smith explained that these techniques help students to focus in on the information they know and on most occasions this strategy leads to a higher score. These courses do not come at a small price. The Education Center charges \$695 for each of its seven-week courses per student. Mainly because of cost, the Center averages less than five students per session. Most of the students who are attending these classes are second semester juniors who have taken the SAT/ACT previously and are seeking ways to improve their scores. Ms. Smith also explained that there are some students who come in with known test anxiety. These students usually come in early in their high school careers to start preparing for the college experience.

The Center does not solely supply SAT/ACT preparation courses. The Center also provides students with basic subject help during the school year. The Center provides support/tutoring/individualized instruction in math, science, reading, English, and sometimes foreign languages (depending on the Center). The Center guarantees to raise a student's grade in a specific subject by one letter grade on their next report card. There are also students who are called return students. These return students are previous students who have taken at least one subject material course and have then later returned to the Center to take the SAT/ACT preparation courses. Ms. Smith stated that approximately fifty percent of the students who take their college preparation courses are return students.

Japanese Student Accounts

The thought of something that closely resembles a cram school does not factor into the average daily U.S. lifestyle. The average American school day does not go beyond the school doors and the regular homework assignments or Advanced Placement classes. In Japan, and many other Asian countries, cram school is understood, accepted, and expected in most cases. For this thesis, I have interviewed five Japanese students. Their names have been changed for the purpose of this paper and they have granted permission to use their stories in this thesis. In these interviews, I have asked them about their school lives, about whether they attended cram school, and how it has affected their lives now that most of them have entered college. Each of these students attended different junior and senior high schools and different cram schools. However, the four students who entered college attend the same university in Aichi, Japan.

The first of these students is a third year university student, Nana. Nana attended a cram school starting in the fifth grade. Nana attended the elementary cram school KUMON, which has made its debut in the United States, and is now considered a rival company to the above mentioned Center of Education. She stated that she attended twice a week and continued this pattern up until her final year in junior high school (the ninth grade American equivalent), after which she started to increase her time at the cram school because she was preparing for the high school entrance exams.

The high school entrance process in Japan is similar to the university entrance process. Each high school has its own entrance examination and the more distinguished the school the more difficult the exam. In contrast to American schools, Japanese students want to enter into a private school rather than a public school. Due to the fact that secondary education is not mandatory in Japan, families must pay tuition for all students enrolled in secondary education. In Japan, in contrast to the U.S., private schools have lower tuition costs than public schools and the financial differences can be extraordinary depending on the location. However, private schools also tend to be more prestigious and harder to enter. These prestigious schools are well-known for better preparing students for the university exams than public schools. It is said in Japan that students who do not make it into a good high school will most likely not make it into a good university. When Nana explained that she worked harder in her third year of junior high school (as did all the other students I spoke with) it was for the purpose of entering into a better high school with the higher goal of entering the university of her choice.

In conclusion to Nana's story, she would spend about four hours per week preparing for high school and would attend the cram school for five days a week during vacation periods. After entering her second year of high school (the American tenth grade) Nana started attending her cram school on a daily basis. Nana stated that her primary drive for attending cram school was the extra English lessons it provided. Typically, the English portion of a college entrance exam holds heavy weight on the final exam score. Because of this, Nana only attended the cram school for a limited time and would study on her own time with self-study packets

which she purchased outside of both regular school and cram school. Nana claimed that the self-help packets suited her personal needs more than a cram school did. When asked if she could go back and prepare differently would she still attend cram school, Nana said “no.” She figured that she spent enough hours on her own time to complete her educational goals. However, when asked about her own future children, Nana stated that she would allow her children to attend a cram school if she felt like their own studying was not enough.

Not every Japanese student feels the same way as Nana. In fact, Kayako Ishihara had a very different student life than Nana. Kayako started attending a cram school in her third year of junior high school up to three times a week at three hours per lecture. During summer and winter breaks she would attend day-long lectures. Kayako stated that sometimes she skipped these lectures and referred to herself as a “bad student.” Then, for the first two years of high school she went to the cram school five or six times a week, again at three hour lectures. Kayako stated that she went so often because she could not study at home. During her third year of high school, Kayako started to attend her cram school on a daily basis from 7:00 in the evening until 10:00 each night. On the weekends, Kayako would take twelve-hour sessions from 10:00 in the morning again until 10:00pm. Kayako also played for her high school basketball team and stated that it was sometimes difficult to keep up with all of her responsibilities. Unlike Nana, Kayako thought that her cram school experience was very important and thinks that students should attend cram schools if they wish to learn more. Kayako wishes that she could go back and study even harder so that she could enter her first choice of university instead of the one

where she is currently enrolled. I asked Kayako if her studying has prepared her enough for her college life and career and her response was “I think general knowledge does not bring usefulness for us.” While her English may have been slightly broken, I understood her meaning; Kayako believes that one cannot have enough knowledge and we must always be willing to learn.

The next two students I talked to were Aya and Masako Hayashi, and Aya fell in-between the seriousness of Kayako and the self-motivated Nana. Aya attended cram school on average four times a week and did not start attending until her last year in high school. However, she did study on her own before then. Aya studied with the purpose of getting into a specific college but also took the Center Exam in order to widen her options to other universities. Aya took advantage of every opportunity her school offered for exam students (the term referring to both junior high and high school third years preparing for their entrance exams) including extended library hours and meeting with teachers to discuss problem areas. Aya thinks that cram school can be important if the student takes it seriously enough and also said it depends on what the student wants to do in life. Like Kayako, both Masako and Aya have regrets about how they studied and wish they could go back and study more to get into their first choice university. However, Aya stated that the only time she felt cram school was vital to her college career was in the last few weeks before her examinations when she was truly “cramming” for her exam.

An interesting common factor between these four young women is the fact that all four of them have spent the 2010-2011 school year abroad in an English

speaking country. Aya is in Australia, Kayako and Nana are both in London, and Masako has spent her year at Ball State University in the United States. I spoke with these women eight months into their study abroad programs. As Nana stated, a large reason for attending cram school is the extra lectures in English and the more experience it provides for learning and speaking the language. I asked these women, "after spending their time abroad, did your session in cram school prepare you for your study abroad?" All four responded with a firm "no." In their own way, each of these Japanese natives said that the English provided in cram school was not sufficient for study abroad or even basic English communication purposes. The four students affirmed that they all had to study on their own time to even hope of catching up with native speakers. Even Kayako, who spent the better part of her three years in the secondary schools, stated that her prior education in English was not of any use to her outside of Japan.

Another area of interest for me was the question of how much (or how little) families supported their exam students. I asked because I was interested in comparing my experiences when in school. My own parents were very active in my education, helping with homework, making sure I studied to get the grades they deemed acceptable, and helping me to balance my club activities and school. I found that for the most part, based on these interviews, that Japanese families stayed separate from their students. Nana said that other than paying for her cram school, her parents were not involved in her school life. Kayako's family supported her by giving her rides to and from cram school and making sure she always had lunch and dinner; as did Aya and Masako's family. However, when it came down to

actually helping with studying, the families seemed to distance themselves and allow their children to work at their own pace.

The fifth student I will discuss in this paper is what the Japanese call a “ruronin” or a wandering student. These wandering students are high school students who did not pass the college entrance exams and have to wait a year before they can attempt to get into college again. For spring 2011 high school graduate Hiro, this is the reality he is facing. Hiro took his entrance exams to his university of choice in early March, 2011. However, even with his regular studies and cram school attendance he was not able to pass the test on the first try. Each university in Japan offers their own examinations twice during the testing period to give students a second chance. Students who pass the test on the first try, though, are allowed first priority admittance and take up space in the schools. Therefore, even a student who passes the exam on the second try may not make it into the school because there is no more room for new students and are thus wait-listed, a practice that is also seen in U.S. universities.

Not passing the test on the first try is a common experience for Japanese exam students. Although discouraged, Hiro was determined to take the test again. Unfortunately, on March 11, 2011, a powerful earthquake and tsunami struck and devastated Japan. Hiro wants to attend a university in Tokyo rather than in his native prefecture of Aichi Japan. However, because of the disaster that struck Japan, the university cancelled the second round of testing for spring 2011 and Hiro was unable to gain admittance to a university. The school decided to take in students

who failed the first exam but who had good high school grades and those who scored well on the Center Exam. Hiro did not take the Center Exam and the university did not admit him based on high school scores alone.

Hiro thus became a “ruronin” student who will have to study and take the exam again next spring. Hiro stated that he would attend cram school for the next year in order to prepare for the next exams. He wants to attend cram school much like he would if he were still attending high school, meaning that he will study all subjects and will attend for several hours a week hopefully every day, he says. He will also search for a part time job and hang out with friends during his free time. While becoming a “ruronin” is a disappointment, he is not giving up on his goals for a college education or on his dream of attending school in Tokyo.

Conclusion

While these two countries are thousands of miles apart, their schooling holds some familiar similarities as well as some stark contrasts. Based off of this information, entering a university is much simpler in America. Even if a student does not get into the college of choice, there are still options such as second semester entrance, community college courses, or attempting to raise standardized test scores. The material of the standardized testing also varies greatly. While the American SAT and ACT focus on math, science and reading the Japanese tests cover much more information such as history (world and Japanese) and English proficiency. The Japanese tests require much more attention than tests in the United States do.

Because these tests are so different from one another it is inconclusive as to which test is a more accurate way of measuring intelligence for college admittance. The purpose of this thesis was to explain the different testing procedures and different ways of preparing students for university education between Japan and America. Based on the information I have received, the Japanese, on average, spend more time preparing for university admittance than an American student would. However, even so, all five of the students I interviewed did not enter into their first choice of university, and one student was not able to enter a university this year. Most Americans would have more options to continue their education and could consider transferring to their first choice university after a few semesters at a less desired university.

Another aspect of my observation is that a large part of Japanese education is preparing to enter college, while the U.S. collegiate undertaking begins upon entering college. Japanese universities do not hold the same standards that U.S. universities hold. It is in my experience, that it is very difficult to enter into a Japanese university but fairly straightforward to graduate once admitted. In comparison, it is easier to enter a U.S. university, but more difficult to graduate. According to the New Yorker, approximately sixty percent of high school graduates attend college. However, in 2010 only 1.5 out of approximately 2.2 million managed to obtain their degree.

Both Japan and America have taken on unique processes to prepare future generations at the collegiate level. I have explained both the American and

Japanese university entrance processes, university preparation standardized testing in America, and the student lives of five Japanese students. I have demonstrated the similarities and difference between these countries with the purpose of exploring other cultures in order to see our own culture in a different light and the possibility of improving our own educational systems within the United States of America.

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